Petitions Committee
Impact of coronavirus on students and on maternity leave
7 May 2020

Session II

Witnesses:
- Sophie Quinn, petition creator
- Zamzam Ibrahim, National President, National Union of Students
- Dr Jo Grady, General Secretary, University and College Union
- Professor Julia Buckingham CBE, President of Universities UK and Vice-Chancellor of Brunel University London

Overview

In the second session, MPs looked at the impact of coronavirus on universities and students. It followed a petition calling for universities to ‘Reimburse all students of this year’s fees due to strikes and COVID-19’, signed by over 330,000 people.

Session Two:

Petition

The second session was opened by committee chair Catherine McKinnell (Lab, Newcastle Upon Tyne North) who asked Sophie Quinn, petition creator why she started the petition and why she was asking for a reimbursement of fees.

Quinn said she felt let down by the quality of the year’s education, particularly as a final year student with so much riding on it. She added that with no access to facilities and the large disruption already faced by the teaching strikes, she had not gained the education of previous years.

Quinn also said that students had been consistently ignored as a population group by successive governments. If it was not possible to get a full refund of fees, she said that first and second year students should be able to resit the year at no extra cost.

McKinnell asked what questions Quinn would like to ask the other panellists. In response, Quinn said that she would like to know the number of students unable to access online education provided and the proportion of tuition that went into non-teaching.

Quinn also wanted to know whether online learning was the same quality as in person teaching and whether students were being properly supported.

Covid-19 impact

Professor Julia Buckingham CBE, President of Universities UK and Vice-Chancellor of Brunel University London, stated that both students and staff had faced considerable difficulties as a result of the crisis and teaching strikes but that it was important to acknowledge when considering the university sector’s response to the crisis, that online learning provision and student support had been put together at tremendous pace.

It would be wrong to respond to the issues affecting students and any complaints they had in a blanket way but rather consideration of complaints should be undertaken at institution level on a case-by-case basis, Buckingham added. She hoped the majority of students felt well supported.

Elliot Colborn (Con, Carshalton and Wallington) asked about the Covid-19 public health guidance issued to universities.
Buckingham responded by saying that universities had responded quickly to the crisis and that the health and safety of students and staff was upper most in Universities UK’s minds. Many students were still in residence or campus and the focus had been on ensuring they were protected and given additional support. Buckingham added that staff had been working incredibly hard and long over the call of duty.

Dr Jo Grady, General Secretary, University and College Union, disagreed, arguing that universities had been slow to respond to the crisis, particularly when compared to schools. She felt that the slowness could be attributed to the financial model of universities and the treatment of students as consumers and the fear that closing down would benefit competitors. Grady wanted to see clearer guidance on the exit plan for universities coming out of the crisis.

**Strikes**

Elliot Colborn (Con, Carshalton and Wallington) asked about the impact of the teaching strikes on students. Buckingham responded by saying that only 58 institutions had participated in the November strikes, accounting for five per cent of staff and that 79 per cent of institutions had reported that the strikes had no or a very low impact on teaching.

Buckingham added that the spring strikes had even lower participation with relatively low impact on students.

Zamzam Ibrahim, National President, National Union of Students, stated that the pandemic had had a far greater impact on students than the strikes.

**Staff struggles**

Grady said that she sympathised with Quinn and students but that staff were in much the same boat, adding that many staff were on insecure fixed-term contracts and had been penalised by universities through strike pay reductions prior to the Covid-19 crisis.

If students were to be given quality education, a cash injection of £2.5 billion would be required to ensure the employment security of 60,000 teachers for two years. This was more important than ever during the crisis, Grady added.

Buckingham responded to Grady by stating that she didn’t recognise the hourly pay situation in universities that Grady had painted, arguing that most students were taught by teachers in secure employment. However, Universities UK had undertaken a review on hourly pay.

**Alternative teaching methods**

Colborn asked about alternative teaching methods.

Grady highlighted the difficulty in producing quality online learning in a short period of time. Buckingham agreed that this may have contributed to the survey results indicating that 90 per cent of students felt as if their education had declined since the crisis.

Ibrahim said that students were worried about broadband access, adding there was huge disparity across institutions in the provision of online learning. Ibrahim wanted to see guidance from the government on what good alternative teaching provision looked like.

**Student concerns**

Apsana Begum (Lab, Poplar & Limehouse) asked about student concerns during the crisis.

Ibrahim responded by saying that students were most concerned by the uncertainty surrounding the assessment of this year and the impact it would have on progression within their degrees. Final year students were most concerned by graduation and the uncertain job market.

Ibrahim also said that students were very concerned by the loss of income from part-time jobs during the crisis.
In terms of government intervention, Ibrahim argued that universities should either offer a reimbursement of fees, a redo of the year for first and second year students or a commitment to write off student debt for the year.

She added that students were missing out on a rite of passage and that many had paid large fees for high quality education and a campus experience that they were missing out on. Students needed to be protected not just as students but as consumers under the Consumer Act.

Buckingham acknowledged the concerns expressed by students and stated that universities were working incredibly hard to ensure as many students as possible would be able to progress and graduate by providing an assessment safety net that did not lower the quality and standards of the qualifications on offer.

New guidelines had been developed to provide universities with a framework for assessing students during the crisis and Universities UK was doing everything it could to work with professional bodies to ensure all qualifications were in line with their requirements. This would all take a period of time however.

Buckingham added that Universities UK was undertaking a piece of work designed to help support students during the job market uncertainty by giving them the best guidance in developing their careers.

She also expressed concern about the loss of income from part-time jobs and reiterated that many universities were offering hardship funds where they could, and food bank schemes like the University of Bath scheme were fairly commonplace.

**Fees**

Martyn Day (SNP, Linlithgow and East Falkirk) asked if students in the UK were receiving the education they had paid for.

Ibrahim said they weren’t and reiterated her calls for reimbursement, resitting the year or student debt to be underwritten.

Grady said that the issues students were facing in relation to the decline in education standards were because of the insecurity faced by university staff.

Buckingham acknowledged that students were experiencing a very different educational experience at the moment. She feared that a number of institutions would struggle financially in the next few years due to the significant decline in international student numbers.